

# PLANNING BRIEFS

PUBLISHED BY THE AMHERST PLANNING DEPARTMENT

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## THE AMHERST CINEMA PROJECT: YET ANOTHER NEW LIFE FOR A GOOD BUILDING

In 1926, after the last major downtown Amherst fire of 1926, a damaged livery stable was sold at auction to the Lawlor Brothers of Greenfield. Borrowing designs for an earlier Knight of Columbus hall, they built the Amherst Theater building, with a single movie screen, small stage and orchestra pit, and row-upon-row of sloped seating. Initially, the Amherst Theater showed movies and offered occasional stage performances. One Wednesday in November 1926 saw the following entertainment:

- \* A feature film (Three's A Crowd, with Harry Langston)
- \* B.F. Keith vaudeville troupe ("5 big acts!")
- \* a comedy short film, and
- \* the Paramount Sound News.

The Amherst Theater was leased by the Lawlor Brothers to the Shea Corporation, which managed it until 1955. The theater sporadically closed and reopened during WWII because of low wartime attendance. In 1955, the theater building was sold to Samuel Goldstein's Western Massachusetts Theater Company, Inc., and was renamed the Amherst Cinema.

Neglect, maintenance costs, and competition from newer multi-screen movie houses eventually closed the Amherst Cinema, which showed its last movie in 1999. Immediately, several groups began to plan for how to reuse the site. A non-profit group, Amherst Center for Stage & Screen (ACSS), began to raise money with the goal of creating a community performing arts center at the site.

Last year, local developer Barry Roberts bought the building outright, and formed an agreement with ACSS for them to manage the theater after he rebuilds it. ACSS will also have an option to purchase the theater from him at in the future. Mr. Robert's goals were to help bring the cinema back to Amherst and put the site back on the Town's tax rolls, while preserving as much of the existing building as possible. The historical features of the building are being preserved, including the slate roof and copper flashing. Some historical features have even been rediscovered. A space in the roof that had previously opened into a cupola was discovered during renovation, and a new cupola is now in place. In addition, the renovated building will be completely accessible.

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Amherst Cinema's new look

## CONSULTANT CHOSEN

On Friday, March 17, the Comprehensive Planning Committee received presentations from the consultants who had submitted proposals to become the Town's partner in the preparation of a Master Plan. After viewing these presentations, reading the proposals carefully, and deliberating, the Committee selected the team assembled by **ACP—Visioning & Planning**. ACP is known nationally for their work, which includes complex projects such as "Imagine New York", a public participation effort to help plan redevelopment of the World Trade Center site. ACP emphasizes the idea that public participation is vital to creating community plans that will get implemented, and they are eager to engage with Amherst's diverse and dynamic population. There will be a public reception in the Town Room, Town Hall at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, May 2, to meet and welcome the consultants.

## RECOMMENDED WEBSITE

Town Government offices have new phone and fax numbers. Although the old numbers will forward for some time, please take note of our new numbers at:  
<http://www.amherstma.gov/departments.asp>

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# THE DESIGN REVIEW PROCESS

**History** - In October 1983, Town Meeting adopted Section 3.2, Design Review, as part of the Zoning Bylaw. During the previous year, in response to construction of the highly modern bank building opposite the northwest corner of the Town Common, the Planning Board and Historical Commission sought a way to require better review of the designs of significant changes in Amherst's historic downtown. Using material adapted from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the two Town boards proposed the creation of a Design Review Board (DRB), which would be a required part of the permit process for downtown projects.

**Membership** - The Design Review Board has five members. Two must be registered design professionals—architects, landscape architects, interior designers, etc. One member must own downtown commercial property or operate a downtown business. One member represents (but is not necessarily a member of) the Planning Board and another must similarly represent the Historical Commission.



*One of the many downtown signs that the DRB has reviewed*

**Where it Applies** - Design review is required for all exterior changes requiring a building permit or land use permit in three different places:

- Anywhere in the downtown General Business (B-G) and abutting Limited Business (B-L) districts
- Within 150 feet of the curb at the outside edge of the Town Common--this applies to any exterior change at all, whether or not it requires a permit.
- Any Town action beyond "routine maintenance" anywhere in Amherst.

This last requirement was deliberate—if Town Meeting believed that there was enough of a public interest in good design to impose a new permit procedure on private

property owners and businesses in downtown Amherst, then it only made sense to require the same review of the designs for Town projects.

As part of their permit review process, the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals can ask for the DRB's advice on a project outside of the three areas listed, even when DRB review is not required.

**How it Works** - Design review in Amherst is unique—it's "mandatory advice." Applicants have to come in and get the DRB's advice, but they don't necessarily have to follow it. It's up to the applicant and any other permit-granting board involved to decide whether the DRB's recommendations will in fact be followed. Not being able to impose changes in designs challenges the DRB. The DRB has to make sure its recommendations make sound economic and design sense, if it wants them to be followed.

DRB applications are available in the planning Department office or online at:

[http://www.amherstma.gov/departments/Planning/permit\\_apps.asp](http://www.amherstma.gov/departments/Planning/permit_apps.asp)

The application fee is \$50, and applicants are encouraged to consult with Planning Department staff prior to filing.

After an application has been filed, the DRB has 35 days to respond. The DRB meets approximately every 2-3 weeks. If the DRB does not respond to an application within 35 days, then the application proceeds as if the DRB recommended approval of the design. When applicants feel that design review is not warranted, they can request that the DRB waive its review.

**Design Principles & Standards** – The DRB has a specific list of design principles and standards that it applies to the review of each application. These emphasize sound design principles, historic preservation, and the encouragement of good new design. No materials or colors or styles are prohibited—designs simply have to be appropriate and compatible with their surroundings. The standards address such design elements as height, proportion, relationships between structures and spaces, shapes, landscape treatments, scale (size), directional expression, architectural and site details, and signs. The principles and standards are also available for the use of other permit-granting boards or authorities.

It has been more than 20 years since Amherst decided to create design review. In that time, the DRB has striven to avoid adding an undue burden of extra time and expense in the permit process—a process for which Amherst has

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*"Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now."*

*- Alan Lakein, writer*

sometimes been justly infamous. Staff will make every attempt to schedule DRB meetings so that they occur in advance of other necessary permit hearings or meetings.

Over time, DRB review has evolved from a protective, “don’t do that” kind of review into an inexpensive form of design consulting. Applicants (including Town departments) are encouraged to go to the DRB first, even when they are just starting to think about the design of their projects. The design advice businesses and Town departments receive from the DRB serves not only to promote a better and more successful result for the private applicant—it protects the public’s interest in a vibrant historic central business district and Town projects that look good and work well.

## POMEROY VILLAGE DESIGN

Over the next few months, the Design Review Board, along with the Planning Department, and the Department of Public Works, will be kicking off a process of community planning in the “Pomeroy Village” area. The sections of West Street and Pomeroy Lane in the vicinity the intersection are going to be redesigned. The intent is to make the street more attractive and walkable, to promote the surrounding mixed-use village center area. A survey is being prepared that will go to residents, business owners, and visitors in the area, to identify local design issues and preferences—watch for it!

## STAFF SPOTLIGHT



## NIELS LA COUR

Niels la Cour was hired as an Associate Planner by the Amherst Planning Department in June 1997, moving here from Saratoga Springs, NY where he was the Director of GIS Services for The LA Group, a private landscape architecture/planning firm. He became a Senior Planner in December 2004.

Niels (pronounced “Nils,” rather than “Neels”) is a first-generation American, the son of Danish parents. Growing up on a thoroughbred horse farm in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky helped to form Niels’ interests in history and special landscapes. In 1983, he earned a BA in Environmental History from Northland College in northern Wisconsin. Niels then worked in the historic and environmental preservation fields for nonprofit groups for five years before attending graduate

school at UMass/Amherst, where he earned a joint Masters in Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning.

Niels enjoys the give-and-take of working with citizens, homeowners, developers, and the Planning Board and developers to ensure that new development in Amherst meets both public and private interests and is of the highest possible quality. He relishes the creative problem-solving involved in using good design and sound planning principles to meet both the needs of the landowners and the Town as a whole. The bottom line, as he says, is that “I really enjoy getting paid to try to do good things for my community.”

Helping Amherst create a state-of-the-art municipal Geographic Information System (GIS) that blends mapping with information about properties and areas has been one of Niels’ most satisfying achievements to date. Niels serves as one of two local government representatives on the statewide MassGIS Advisory Board. He is also on the Board of Directors of the Northeast Arc/Info Users Group (NEARC)—professionals involved with the powerful and widely used computer mapping system, ESRI’s ArcGIS.

Lately, Niels’ work with the Comprehensive Planning Committee is his biggest focus, as Amherst launches its first major Master Planning effort in 30 years. Niels is currently helping the Committee to select a top-flight master planning consultant to help Amherst. He will be the principal staff person helping the Committee and the consultant coordinate all the resources—Town staff, boards/committees, citizens, and information resources (including GIS)—that will be needed for Amherst to effectively plan for its future.

Niels lives near the center of Amherst (often walking or biking to work) with his wife Sarah, a landscape planner with Dodson Associates, and his two children, Ross (10) and Kyra (7). After his family, Niels’ passion is sailing. He also enjoys hiking, skiing, camping, biking and travel, and has recently taken up the energetic-if-messy sport of paintball.



## PLANNING DEPARTMENT INTERNS: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The Planning Department's interns are students in the regional planning program at the University of Massachusetts. In their time with the Town, they gain extremely varied experience, but where do they go after graduation? We caught up with a handful of recent interns to find out.

**James Errickson** (2003-2005) is the Associate Planner for the City of Lowell's Division of Planning and Development. His responsibilities include administering the City's Planning Board. He reports that he's learned a great deal about the inner workings of municipal government, city politics, and all the fun nuances of the profession of planning.

**Eric Hove** (2001-2003) is Assistant Director of Sustainable Development at the state Executive Office of Environmental Affairs in Boston. He works on Smart Growth and urban environment issues, and helps run grant programs such as the Smart Growth Technical Assistance program. He sees former Amherst Planning Director Bob Mitchell in meetings often.

This past June, **Jason Bachand** (2000-2001) made the transition from the public sector to the private sector by accepting a position with Doucet & Associates, a civil engineering and planning consulting firm. He is working in their Easthampton office, working to expand their planning services in New England. Prior to joining Doucet & Associates, he worked for 3 ½ years as an Assistant Town Planner with the Town of Windsor, CT.

**Carlton Hart** (1993-1995) has just accepted a position with National Capital Planning Commission in DC and will be starting in April as a Community Planner working on Long Range Planning initiatives for federally owned land in the Metro DC area. Previously, he had been working for the Park, Recreation and Cultural Resources Department in Arlington County, Virginia.

## NEW FACES IN PLANNING AND ZONING

**Leandro Rivera** joined the Planning Board this autumn. A South Amherst resident, Leandro is a consulting engineer, and has been an active participant in the local planning process as a long-time member of the Atkins Corner Working Group.

The Zoning Board of Appeals has brought on three new members over the past few months. **Hilda Greenbaum** has served on many Town committees, as well as being a long-time Town Meeting member. She is a local property owner and manager, and has a long-standing interest in land use issues. **Russell Frank** is a lawyer, and has coached various youth sports teams. **Jane Ashby** is a Town Meeting member, an adjunct faculty member at Hampshire College, and is currently finishing her PhD in psychology at the University of Massachusetts. The new members will assist in filling the shoes of **Zina Tillona**, who retired this March after nearly eight years of hard work and several years of serving as chair of the ZBA. She is a lawyer, and a retired professor of Italian language.

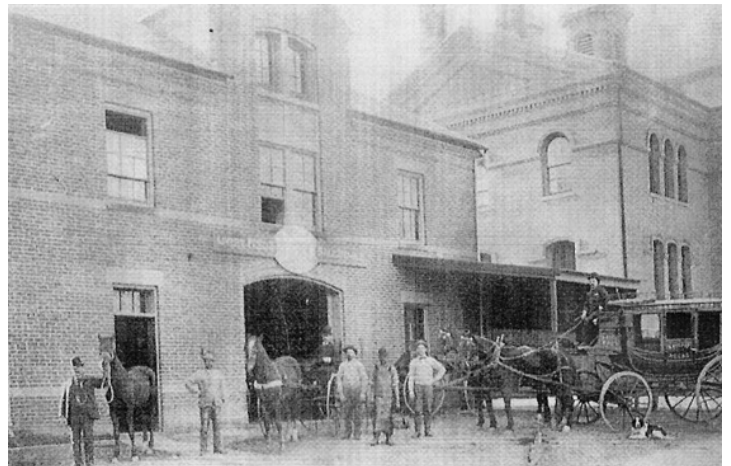
Finally, in Planning staff news, we have a new change for a well-known face. **Jonathan Tucker**, who has been Interim Planning Director since the departure of former director Robert Mitchell, has been promoted to Planning Director.

*Paige's Livery Stable and the Amity Street School, 1880s  
The building that survived fire and reconstruction  
to become the Amherst Cinema*

## AMHERST CINEMA (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

The renovated and expanded Amherst Cinema building will contain a mix of uses. In addition to three movie screens and live performance space, there will be retail spaces on the ground floor and an outdoor sitting terrace, and office space above. The first of these retail spaces has recently opened up as Amherst Coffee, and is already a lively spot. The designs and plans for the redeveloped building were done by the architectural firm Kuhn-Riddle, who plan to move their headquarters to the new office space above the Cinema when it is completed.

Construction is ongoing, and the theaters are expected to be opened this fall. The seats have been ordered!



## CONTACT INFORMATION:

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Amherst, MA 01002

**New Phone Number! 413-259-3040**  
<http://www.amherstma.gov/planning>  
[planning@amherstma.gov](mailto:planning@amherstma.gov)

Planning Briefs is available on our website at <http://www.amherstma.gov/planning>

~Prepared by Cana McCoy, Graduate Intern, Amherst Planning Department~